

Plainville High School Commencement Address

May 17, 2008

Let me begin by saying congratulations to the 2008 graduating class of Plainville High School. Being here in my hometown this afternoon brings back many memories including my own graduation from Plainville High School right here on Cardinal Field.

And, while giving a graduation speech is one of the most difficult tasks-telling someone how to live their life is never easy-there is no place in the world that I would rather be, where I feel more accepted and where I know that people still care about me than here in my hometown. Although I come and go, Plainville is a real part of me and growing up here shaped my life. Other than my faith and family, there is nothing that has contributed more to my life-determined who I am, how I think and what I have become than Plainville, Kansas. So I am honored to be asked by the senior class to join them today.

Before addressing the graduates, let me first visit with some of the others that helped make this day possible. First, let me recognize moms and dads. If you ask these seniors who had the most influence on their lives, not one would say "my Congressman." Most likely they would indicate their parents. Few things in life are more important than our jobs as moms and dads, and parents deserve our thanks. My Mom and Dad are in the audience this afternoon. I would like to publicly acknowledge how fortunate I am to have loving parents who in their 71st year of marriage continue to serve as role models for me and my family. There is no more important job in any of our lives than being a good parent.

Moms and dads, thank you for all you have done to help these graduates reach this point in their lives. For you this means turning a page as well. As your son or daughter moves on, you can take pride in knowing you have helped them take an important step forward. Graduates, please join me in applauding the most important people in your lives-moms and dads.

I also want to recognize the role of teachers in the lives of students. The other people these seniors would mention as making a difference in their lives, besides mom and dad, are their teachers. Plainville schools have been blessed with excellent teachers, many who have changed students' lives in important ways. It is true in my own life. I had great teachers in both grade school and high school. Some who still live in this community today-Mrs. Bailey, my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Richmond, my first grade teacher, Mrs. Pruter, my fourth grade teacher, and Mr. Hemphill, my coach and science teacher. Educators taught us not only facts and figures, but also instilled a love for learning and a sense that there is a big world out there beyond the city limits of Plainville. So today I salute the teachers who helped mold these lives. I hope all teachers find satisfaction in knowing that they have made a tremendous difference in the lives of these graduating seniors.

And now to the graduates-let me visit with you about your lives and your futures. I have three recommendations.

First, commit yourselves to excellence in whatever you do, big things and little. There is a distinction between excellence and perfection. Things will not always turn out to be perfect.

Perfection has to do with the end product, but excellence has to do with the process. It is making the most of your God-given abilities. I had a part-time job in high school on a crew of students helping the school custodian, Scotty Reidel. He made sure that no matter what it took, these school buildings and this athletic field were well cared for in every detail. Mopping the floor is perhaps a little thing but Scotty taught us that doing the little things well is a big thing. This community taught me that striving for excellence matters.

Second, commit yourselves to character. Character has to do with the principles you live your life by. Honesty, courage to do what is right, personal responsibility-that is the kind of character we need in each of you and in each citizen of our nation. Again I learned a lot about character here in Plainville-from my church, from my Sunday school teachers and from my days as a Boy Scout in Troop 109.

I remember an early lesson. I had "found" six pop bottles in our neighbor's back yard and took them to the grocery store. In those days you could get three cents for empty bottles. My parents found out and required me to pay the neighbors for the bottles. I still remember as a six year old knocking on the neighbors', Fred and Joy Glick's door, and explaining my crime and handing them eighteen cents.

What we are exposed to and what is allowed by society in today's world has changed since I sat in your chair. But if you are to live a meaningful life and if we are to have any hope of addressing the problems we face in today's world, remember that you must recognize there is right and wrong. This community taught me that integrity matters.

My third suggestion is to commit yourselves to service to others. I am convinced that success is not measured by what you get out of life, but by what you give back. We are often told that our country is in need of great leaders. I believe that what we really need are great servants-people who serve others, not themselves. We need people like your parents and your teachers who put doing for you above doing for themselves. I believe that individuals who volunteer their time in churches, neighborhoods and communities will have the greatest effect on other people's lives and in the process add meaning to their own.

All my life in Plainville I saw people helping others. That's what small towns do. The benefits, the bake sales, shoveling the neighbor's sidewalks, mowing their grass, harvesting their wheat, pitching in to see that when something needs to get done, it gets done-this community taught me the value of helping others.

Those are the three suggestions I had for how you should live your lives-excellence, character and service. But as I sat down this morning one last time to prepare to visit with you this afternoon, I decided there was one more thing I wanted to share with you.

From my own experiences I can tell you that satisfaction does not come from money, status or power in our nation's capital. There is nothing in my background that would suggest that I would grow up to become a Member of Congress-no financial or political heritage in my family. My Dad worked in the oil fields and my Mom was the lady you paid your electric bill to. I am a first generation college graduate that happened to find politics and government interesting. So I set a goal of being a member of the United States House of Representatives. With the help of a great many people in this town and across Western Kansas I succeeded in reaching that goal. Being elected to Congress was something I really wanted and I should have had a real sense of satisfaction following my election. Despite my success there was still something missing. When

we set goals for ourselves, when these goals are materialistic or driven by ego, even when the goal is met, we are left feeling empty and unsatisfied. For satisfaction in life comes not in meeting the goals we establish for ourselves; but instead living a life in accordance with God's will-satisfying God's goals for our lives. I came to understand that God had placed in my life a great opportunity. I was not elected to office to elevate my standing in this world or to satisfy my ego, but rather to the best of my ability to live a life in service to God. An individual's highest sense of satisfaction arises from a personal relationship with God and living a life following God's will for that life-not just doing our own thing.

Your education at Plainville High School has prepared you well for additional education or for a career. But more importantly you are called upon to make a life. Not only to make a dollar, but to make a difference. Not just to find happiness, but to pursue usefulness. Always remember: no job, regardless of salary, can take the place of a life committed to something greater than oneself. The challenge is to seek a life that is something more than just being comfortable. This nation will not be better off because we have one more millionaire, but will be better if one more person lives his or her life following God's will and committed to excellence, character and service.

The world is a large and wonderful place and it is your time to step into it. Endless possibilities will present themselves to the members of the class of 2008. I ask that regardless of where life takes you remember where you came from. You and I had the opportunity to grow up in a great little town. This realization will become clearer as you become older. Our community has small town, Midwestern values. You are surrounded by people that know and care for you. Now, take your diploma into the world, commit to a life of excellence, character and service, and you will achieve all the success that you deserve. I am proud to have you as fellow Cardinal alumni. Thank you for the invitation to share this day with you. Congratulations and God bless.